THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 23:
TACITUS AND GERMANIC SOCIETY

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of English language. This is Episode 23: Tacitus and Germanic Society. In this episode, we're going to explore the social, legal and political culture of the early Germanic tribes. And I'm going to do that by using the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus who provided us with the first detailed look at the early Germanic tribes. And we'll continue to explore how certain Modern English words developed during this early Germanic period.

But before I begin, let me remind you that the History of the Alphabet series is still available through iTunes, Amazon.com, and the website, historyofenglishpodcast.com. And if any of you have any problems purchasing or downloading the series, just send me a quick note at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And, as always, if you have any other questions or comments regarding the podcast, you can always reach me at the same address.

So let's turn to this episode. And let me begin by noting that I originally intended to discuss the writing of Tacitus in a single episode. But as I began putting this episode together, I realized that there was really too much information for just one episode. So I'm actually going to deal with the subject of Germanic culture in two parts. This episode will focus on the social and political structure of the Germanic tribes, and the nature of Germanic law and punishment. And I am going to use Tacitus as a 'jumping off point' for that discussion. In the next episode, I'm going to focus on Germanic religion and mythology. And I'll also explore the early runic writing system which developed among the Germanic tribes shortly after Tacitus.

So let's begin our look at the Germanic tribal culture. Over the past couple of episodes, I looked at the common Germanic language which linguists call Proto-Germanic – or the first Germanic language. And this early Proto-Germanic period extends from before 500 BC to around the first century BC. During this period, there would have been some linguistic variation among the Germanic tribes, but it is believed that the languages of these tribes was similar enough that we can think of it as a more-or-less common language.

But we're now at the first century of the common era or AD (and I'll just use AD from now on in this episode). And at this point, some significant changes were beginning to occur. From this point forward, the various Germanic tribes began to coalesce into larger and more distinct tribal units. And as these larger tribes began to coalesce, they began to develop their own distinct identities, their own distinct cultures, and increasingly, their own distinct languages.

From these tribal units, we will start to see the emergence of new tribes with names that will become synonymous with the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Names like the Goths, the Vandals, the Franks – and of course the Angles and the Saxons. So we're now at a transitional period, from the early common Germanic era to the later period of Germanic invasions.

And I'm going to explore this transitional period with the help of the earliest detailed written account of these early Germanic tribes. And that account comes to us via the Roman historian Tacitus. At the end of the first century AD – around the year 98 – Tacitus complied a detailed account of the Germanic people which he called <u>Germania</u>.

Now it's very difficult to explore the history of the early Germanic tribes without encountering the writings of Tacitus. And it may be surprising that I haven't discussed Tacitus prior to ths point. But that's only because I'm trying to maintain some semblance of a chronological order. So most of what we've looked over the last three episodes pre-dated Tacitus. And much of that knowledge is based on archaeology and linguistic reconstructions. But now – at the end of the first century AD – we finally have Tacitus and his detailed description of the early Germans.

Now since Tacitus's <u>Germania</u> is so important to historians, it is important to understand a little bit about it as a historical source. First, the actual book was lost during the so-called "Dark Ages" and Middle Ages. So there was no knowledge of it after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. And this is part of the reason why this period is called the 'Dark Ages' – because so much of the earlier knowledge of the Romans had disappeared during this period. And <u>Germania</u> by Tacitus is a very small example of that loss.

But in the year 1455, almost 14 centuries after it was written, a single copy of the book was discovered in an abbey in modern-day Germany. And this copy of the book was taken to Italy where it was examined and studied. But copies soon made their way back to central Europe which was then part of the Holy Roman Empire. And it was here that this ancient Roman historical account came to be dissected and analyzed almost word by word.

Up to that point in history, there really wasn't a common Germanic identity. In fact, the terms *German* or *Germanic* weren't even in common use at the time. But it was the fascination with Tacitus's history which led many scholars in central Europe to begin studying the so-called "Germanic" people. And in an earlier episode, I mentioned how the invasion of this region by Napoleon in the 1800s really kick-started the study of Germanic culture and identity among the people of the region. But at least among scholars and academics, the study of German culture really began a couple of centuries earlier with the discovery of this book by Tacitus.

Now the discovery of <u>Germania</u> was both a blessing and a curse for historians. It was an obvious blessing in the sense that it provided a detailed account of the ancient Germanic tribes. And that was important because virtually nothing was known about these ancient Germans during this period in the late Middle Ages.

So you can imagine why Central European historians were so fascinated by this book. But it was also a curse in the sense that it was carefully parsed and analyzed, and it was assumed by many to be an accurate depiction of these people. But we now know that there are some elements of the work that have to be read with a lot of scepticism.

First, it isn't clear if Tacitus ever actually traveled to the region. Some modern historians are convinced that he didn't. It appears that one of his primary sources of information was a History of the Roman wars in Germania written by Pliny the Elder about 40 years earlier. Tacitus also apparently relied on information from traders, merchants and other people who had traveled into the region. So it is very likely that everything he wrote was based on the second-hand accounts of others.

The other problem is that Tacitus was motivated by a desire to criticize what he considered to be the corrupt and decadent lifestyle of the Romans of his day. So he tended to play up certain features of the Germans like their monogamy and their chastity. He considered them to be simple people, but in a positive sense – in the sense that they were pure and moral people. He described them as very brave warriors. And he gave us the very unfortunate phase "pure blood" to describe the Germans.

And now you can probably see the curse of <u>Germania</u>. Some of the history is questionable because we don't know how much was based on actual accounts and how much was made-up or exaggerated by Tacitus to make some larger point about Roman society. And because he was inclined to emphasize the morality and purity of these people, well you can see how that got twisted by German nationalists in the 19th and 20th centuries who were looking to prove that the German people were part of some ideal, master race.

But notwithstanding the problems with <u>Germania</u>, it remains an essential source for the study of the early Germanic tribes, if for no other reason than it's the only detailed account we have from this time period. So with that very broad disclaimer out of the way, let's take a look at what Tacitus had to say about these tribes. And let me begin by noting that I am not going to explore every aspect of the book. I am just going to make note of some of the information which is relevant to our story of the Germanic tribes and their language.

The first thing to note about <u>Germania</u> is how short it is. Because it's been read, and parsed and dissected so much through the years, it's easy to get the impression that it is some massive work of literature. In reality, it's not that big at all. My standard paperback version is only about 25 pages long. So again, you can see why every word has been dissected by scholars over the years. There just isn't a whole lot there, but it is much more than we have from any other source.

So as we look at the book, let's begin at the beginning. Tacitus begins by describing the general location of the tribes in northern Europe. And he does this initially by describing three separate groupings of tribes which he says were descended from three sons of an ancient God. One group were called the Ingvaeones – and this group was located in the north along the North Sea. Another group was called the Istvaeones – and this group was the westernmost group and were located nearer the Rhine. And a third group was called the Irminones – and this group was located eastward along the River Elbe.

He later described the individual tribes of these regions which make up these groupings, so it's not entirely clear why he used this initial grouping into three parts. There is a tendency to assume that he was referring to the ultimate division of the Germanic tribes into the North

Germanic tribes, the West Germanic tribes and the East Germanic tribes. But modern historians don't think that was the case.

It actually appears that the three groupings mentioned by Tacitus were all part of what we know today as the "Western Germanic tribes." As I've mentioned previously, the North Germanic tribes in Scandinavia and Denmark ultimately produced the Vikings and their Old Norse language – and that language eventually evolved into the modern Scandinavian languages.

And the eastern Germanic tribes migrated southeastward. Some of these tribes eventually reached the Black Sea region. And these easternmost tribes remained migratory and played a large role in the fall of the Western Roman Empire.

But then we have those West Germanic tribes. And those are particularly important to us because they included the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes and the Frisians, among many others. Given that these tribes were located in Central Europe – generally east of the Rhine – they were the ones located closest to the Roman Empire. So they were the ones who the Romans encountered and traded with the most. And since Tacitus's description was based on second and third hand accounts of Romans who had traveled into the region, it was mostly these Western Germanic tribes who were included in the descriptions set forth in Germania.

And it appears that the three basic groupings of tribes described by Tacitus were three separate portions of these Western Germanic tribes. Tacitus says that the Ingvaeones were located in the north along the North Sea. And this particular group is of the most important to us because it appears that this group included the tribes which would become known as the Frisians, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. In other words, the tribes which were the source of the later migrations to the British Isles, and which are therefore the ultimate source of the English language. Again these tribes were located in the North Sea region – around Denmark and the Netherlands.

The second group mentioned by Tacitus – the Istvaeones – were the westernmost group of Germanic tribes. This group was located near and around the Rhine itself. And this group apparently included the tribes which would later become known as the Franks. And the Franks are indirectly important to our story because the Franks eventually conquered the territory of Gaul after the Roman Empire in the west collapsed. The Frankish Kingdom which emerged produced leaders like Charlemagne. But more importantly for our story, it produced the later nation-state of France which is named after the Franks. And of course, the history of France and the French language is intertwined with the history of England and the English language. But during the time of Tacitus, the ancestors of the Franks lived to the south and west of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians, and they lived along the Rhine. The Old Frankish language eventually died out in France where Latin remained the dominant language, and it eventually evolved into the Old French Language.

But the Frankish language actually survived east of the Rhine in the Germanic regions, and it is the ultimate ancestor of modern Dutch, as well as Flemish which is spoken in Flanders in northern Belgium. Because the Franks were basically southwestern neighbors of the Angles and

Saxons in northern Europe, their language was actually very similar to the language of the Angles and Saxons. And even today, Dutch is one of the closest languages to English – at least Old English – and that's because the ancestral speakers of those languages were basically neighbors in this part of northern Europe.

Now Tacitus also identified that third group of Germanic people called the Irminones. This group was located just to the east of the group which I just mentioned. This third group was located along the River Elbe, so that puts them in the middle between the Rhine in the west and the Eastern Germanic tribes further to the east. This third group probably included tribes such as the Alamanni, the Langobardi and the Marcomanni. In later years, these tribes migrated southward displacing Celtic groups and eventually settling in southern Germany and northern Italy. That means that they eventually settled in the heart of modern Germany. And these are believed to be ancestors of the modern German speakers in the highlands of southern Germany. One of these tribes – the Langobardi – eventually settled in northern Italy and established an independent kingdom there after the Roman Empire collapsed. This is the ultimate source of the modern Lombardy region of northern Italy. Of course, their language eventually gave way to Italian just as the Frankish language gave way to Old French. So many of these ancient Germanic languages died out and were replaced by local Romance languages. But the Alamanni and the Marcomanni retained their Germanic languages, and those languages form basis of modern Alamannic and Bavarian dialects in Modern German.

The point of all of this was to help you see how interconnected all of the western German dialects are, and to make the point that the linguistic ancestors of Modern English, Modern Dutch and Modern German were all living next to each other in northern Europe around the time of Tacitus in 98 AD.

So around the time of Tacitius, the northern areas of the Rhine were heavily Germanic, but the southern areas were still a mixture of Germanic, Celtic and perhaps even other tribal groups. But over the next couple of centuries, the migration of Germanic tribes southwards would continue. And eventually all of this region will be occupied by Germanic-speaking tribes. And Tacitus actually discusses this issue a little later in Germania, so I'll have more to say about the interaction of Germans and Celts in these regions in the next episode.

Now before we leave the discussion of Tacitus's division of these early tribes, let me make a quick note about linguistics. We know that the North Germanic tribes gave us Old Norse and the modern Scandinavian languages. And we know that the East Germanic tribes gave us the Gothic language and the languages of other tribes from that region which were never written down and which have long since died out. And we now have Tacitus telling us that the West Germanic tribes were divided into these three groups. But at this early point – during the first century AD – the language of these West German tribes was probably still a more or less common language. Linguistic differences were probably starting to emerge between the Northern tribes, the Eastern tribes and the Western tribes. But among the various Western tribes, the language or dialects were still very, very similar. And those West Germanic peoples could probably communicate with each other without any problems at all. It may be have been similar to modern differences

between the various regional dialects of English. Some are more distinct that others, but communication between the dialects is not typically a problem.

But if a West Germanic speaker had encountered a East German Gothic speaker, then communication may have been a little more difficult. But even so, the regional differences would have been small enough at this early point that East German Goths and West German Saxons could probably communicate with each other without too much difficulty. So we're nearing the end of the original common proto-Germanic language. And we're starting to see regional differences emerge. But the precise nature of those differences, and the overall extent of those differences, is difficult to pinpoint with any certainty during the time of Tacitus.

Now Tacitus also tells us in this same early chapter of Germania that the Germans of this region were indigenous or native to this region. And part of his evidence to support this claim is that the region is so uninviting. He writes "who would have left Asia or Africa or Italy and sought Germany, which is rough in terrain, bitter in climate, gloomy to live in and to see, unless it be one's native land?" Well fortunately, modern scholars use more precise techniques to determine such things. But this description of Germania reflects the common Roman attitude of the time. This was barbarian territory. It was harsh, cold and dangerous. And it was a region that Rome had been unable to conquer. So it had to be especially harsh and dark and dangerous if even the mighty Romans couldn't tame it. And again, Tacitus gives us the same view right at the beginning of his book.

Shortly after introducing the three groupings of tribes, Tacitus makes one of the most controversial and unfortunate statements in the book. He writes, "I personally incline to the views of those who think that the peoples of Germany have not been polluted by any marriages with other tribes and that they have existed as a particular people, pure and only like themselves. As a result, all have the same bodily appearance, as far as is possible in so large a number of men: fiery blue eyes, red hair, large bodies which are strong only for violent exertion." And there you have it. What is probably the first written notion that the Germans were a pure race of people with blue eyes and – interestingly - red hair. And again, you can see how these words were interpreted and twisted by later Germans after this book was discovered and read and the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Suddenly, a group of people who had no real national identity had this book – and these words – from Tacitus. And when these notions of purity were combined with the early evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin, and the early linguistic research of Jacob Grimm and others who spoke of an ancient dominant people called the Aryans, well you can see how all of this got mixed together to form some notion of a pure Germanic Aryan identity.

And I mention this because this is the ultimate historical basis for some of those notions. And as I noted in an earlier episode, it's a warning to those who seek to misuse linguistic or scientific research to promote some other agenda. And it also shows the deep historical roots of some of these notions which still exist to this day. And it also shows why later historians have read Tacitus with a much more skeptical eye than earlier scholars did.

So we're only a couple of pages into Germania, and you can begin to see why we have to be so careful in interpreting what Tacitus has to tell us. But from here, we get detailed descriptions of the culture and lifestyle of the early Germanic tribes. And for the most part, modern historians believe that these chapters provide a more or less accurate description of the early Germans. Most of what he writes seems to be confirmed by the archaeological evidence and by later accounts from other sources.

He begins by noting the German use of Romans coins, and he discusses their interest in certain precious metals. He writes, "those nearest our border value gold and silver for commercial purposes and recognize and prefer certain types of our money: those farther away from us make use of barter in a simpler and more ancient manner. They like money that is ancient and long known, notched silver coins and coins stamped with a two-horse chariot. They favor silver more than gold, not from any predilection, but because the number of silver coins is easier to use for those who trade in common and cheap items."

So let's consider what Tacitus tells us about the metals and coins used by the Germanic tribes. I have already discussed in earlier episodes how Germanic tribes near the Roman border began to trade with the Romans early on. And I noted how Celtic tribes in Britain had begun to use Roman coins even before the Romans invaded Britain. The economic power of Rome was so great during this period that even peoples outside of the empire were using Roman coins for trade and commerce. And this is supported by the archaeological evidence. So Tactius confirms this. It is interesting that the early Germans didn't really have a preference for gold over silver. They actually preferred the small denomination of the silver coins because they could be used to trade smaller and cheaper items.

I also discussed back in Episode 20 how the Roman word for money – which was *moneta* – was borrowed by the early Germanic tribes. The western Germans took the word as *munita* meaning money or coins, which were basically the same thing at the time. And this word became *mynet* in Old English, still meaning coins or money. It wasn't until the Middle English period that the word came to refer to the place where coins were made, and its pronunciation shifted to *mint* as we know it today.   And of course, the Norman French brought that Latin word *moneta* into English a second time after the Norman invasion, where it ultimately produced the word *money* in modern English. And this later word *money* replaced that earlier Old English word *mynet* as a general word for currency.

I also noted that the early trade between the Germans and the Romans resulted in other words borrowed into the original Germanic language – words like *chest*, *dish*, *cup*, *kettle*, *pillow*, *sack*, *pepper*, *butter*, *cheese*, *wine* and others. And even the word *cheap* originated as an early Germanic borrowing from Latin. So all of those examples I given before, but I wanted to mention them again here since Tacitus writes about the early trade between the Romans and the Germans.

Also, since I mentioned the word *wine* as an early Germanic borrowing from the Romans, there was one aspect of this borrowing which I didn't mention in the earlier episode, but which I did discuss the alphabet series. So I want to mention here. We know that the modern English word is

wine with a 'w' at the beginning. And throughout all of the early Germanic dialects and languages, the word also began with a 'w' sound. But the modern Italian word is *vino* with a 'v' at the beginning, and that word comes from the Latin word *vinum*. Well, one of the reason why linguists know that the Latin word for wine was a very early borrowing by the Germanic tribes – and not a later borrowing – is because the word was originally pronounced with an initial 'w' sound by the Romans. It was originally pronounced as /wee-num/ in Latin. The 'w' sound shifted to a 'v' sound in Later Latin. So the fact that the early Germanic dialects had the word *wine* with an initial 'w' sound meant that it had been borrowed very early on before that Latin sound shift occurred. So you can see how linguistic evidence helps us to determine when some of these words were borrowed.

Another example of this same sound shift is the modern English word *wall* which was also borrowed very early on from the Romans. The later Latin word was *vallum*, but early on it was pronounced as /wallum/. So the fact that this word appears with an initial 'w' in the Germanic languages, but a 'v' in Latin, is a sign that the word was borrowed early on before the sound change occurred. By the way, the word *wall* was borrowed that those neighboring tribes along the Rhine that I mentioned earlier, and the tribes north of there who were the ancestors of the Franks, the Saxons and Frisians and the Angles, because the word had a 'w' sound in all of those languages. But the version of the word in the Scandinavian languages begins with a 'v' sound. That suggests that Old Norse speakers – the Vikings and their ancestors – borrowed the word at a later date. In fact, it appears that those tribes borrowed the word from the Low German speakers in northern Germany who had borrowed the word from Latin at a later date. So you can actually see how linguistic evidence helps us to determine not only when a word was borrowed, but it can also help us to determine where the word was borrowed.

Now after talking about Germanic coins, Tacitus discussed the use of iron by the Germanic tribes. He noted that the Germans used iron weapons, but he concluded that iron must not have been abundant in Germania because the Germans tended to use smaller iron weapons like spears, instead of larger weapons like swords or lances.

We know from other evidence that the Germans were using iron weapons and had iron technology. The use of iron was apparently borrowed from the Celtic tribes who the Germans encountered to the south. Remember that the Celts were the first people of Europe to master iron technology. So some of this technology passed to the Germanic tribes to the north. And not surprisingly, it appears that the Celtic word for 'iron' was borrowed by the Germanic tribes. And this conclusion is based upon the similarity of the words in the Celtic languages and the Germanic languages. The Old Irish version is *iarn*, and the Welsh version is *haearn*. The Old English version of the word was *isærn*, and it existed in an almost identical verison in Gothic, Old Norse, Old Saxon and Old High German. So the Modern English word *iron* derives from an early Germanic borrowing from the ancient Celts. By the way, Latin borrowed an Etruscan word for iron which became *ferrum* in Latin. This is where the chemical symbol for iron (FE) came from.

After discussing the Germanic use of iron weapons, Tacitus turns to the political structure of the tribes in the next chapter. He notes that Germanic kings were chosen on the basis of noble birth. And generals were chosen on the basis of bravery. He also notes that Germanic kings don't have limitless or arbitrary power. So it appears that there was some type of check on the kings powers, and there was some semblance of law which even the kings had to obey.

So let's consider the Germanic concept of a king. I mentioned in an earlier episode that the Old English word for 'king' was *cyning*. That word was derived from an earlier Germanic word which was *kuning*. Again, this word meant king or ruler from this earlier Germanic period. Now the Germanic tribes also had a similar word – *kunjam* – which mean family. And this word ultimately evolved into the Old English word *cynn* spelled C-Y-N-N. And we still have this word in Modern English, only now it is spelled K-I-N. So Germanic *kuning* and *kunjam* became Old English *cyning* and *cynn*. And the point here is that many linguists believe these two words are very closely related. They think that the original Germanic word for 'king' was derived from the word for 'family.' And it basically meant 'leader of the family' or 'leader of the people.' And even today, the modern English words *king* and *kin* are identical except for that extra 'g' in *king*. So this connection tells us a lot about the nature of those original Germanic kings. They weren't like European kings of the later Middle Ages with divine right and unlimited authority. They were just leaders of the family or the tribe. And apparently they were subject to certain rules just like the rest of the tribe. And keep this idea in the back of your mind when we get to the Anglo-Saxon rulers of England and the early Norman and Plantagenet kings of England. Because the idea that there are certain limitations on the king's powers, as ultimately represented by the Magna Carta, was a very old idea which the Anglo-Saxons had inherited from their Germanic roots. But it wasn't as common in other parts of Europe. And that was one of the things which tended to distinguish the English monarchs from the other European monarchs during the Middle Ages and thereafter.

So the Germanic tribes had a word for 'king' that may have been derived from the Germanic word for 'family.' But it also appears that they adopted the Celtic word for 'king' as well. I mentioned in an earlier episode that the Latin word for king was *rex* and the Celtic word was *rix* – and both words were derived from an original Indo-European word. As the Germanic tribes encountered the Celtic tribes, they apparently borrowed the Celtic version of the word. The Germanic Goths had the word as *reiks* meaning 'ruler'. It also meant 'powerful' in Gothic, and it was also borrowed into many of the other early Germanic dialects meaning 'powerful' as well. That included Old Norse, Old High German, Old Saxon, Old Frisian and even Old English.

The Old Saxon version of the word was *riki*. And the Old English version was originally something like /ree-kuh/, but in Old English the 'k' sound became a 'ch' sound in a lot of words. So Old English had the word as *rice* (/ree-chuh/). And it later evolved into *rich* in modern English. So the modern English word *rich* is ultimately derived from a Germanic word meaning 'powerful,' which was itself borrowed from the Celtic word for 'king' or 'ruler.' By the way, while the word evolved into *rich* in Old English, it evolved into *Reich* within German meaning ' kingdom or state.' So why would the Germanic tribes have borrowed the Celtic word for 'king' or 'ruler' when they already had their own word, which ultimately became the word *king* in Modern English? Well, it may have been because the political structure of the Celtic tribes was

different from the political structure of the Germanic tribes. And therefore, the Celtic *rix* held a different status that the Germanic *king*. But notice that the Germanic tribes didn't tend to use the Celtic version of the word as 'king.' They used it to mean 'powerful.' So perhaps they just borrowed it as an adjective meaning 'powerful' because Celtic kings were considered to be very powerful.

Now beyond the level of the Germanic king, the over political structure of the Germans was very similar to other ancient Indo-European societies. Of course, the king was at the top, then below the king was the nobility. The later Anglo-Saxons called this class of nobles the *æthelings* and *ealdormen*. Of course, the term Earl has survived into modern English. But *ætheling* largely disappeared after the Norman Conquest of England.

Below the nobles were the freemen. These people were called *karls*. And this word has filtered down to us in modern English in a variety of ways. This word ultimately resulted in the pejorative word *churl* in British English which meant a 'lowly, common or backwards person.' It also resulted in the Germanic name *Karl* which is still a common name in English speaking countries. But interestingly, it is also the root of the name *Charles*, which is an even more common name. During the early Middle Ages, the Germanic Franks conquered Gaul and established the early Frankish kingdom which later became France. One of the early kings was Pepin II. He had an illegitimate son named Karl, which may have been a nickname based on the sense of the word *karl* as a common man or free man. In other words, not of noble birth. And again, this young son, Karl, was illegitimate, so he wasn't technically of noble birth. But when Pepin II died, Karl fought Pepin's legitimate son for control of the kingdom, and young Karl won the war. He became known as "Karl the Hammer." But over time, in the early French language, a lot of sounds shifted and slurred. And *Karl* became *Charles*. And eventually in English, it became *Charles*. And we know Charles the Hammer today as Charles Martel, the founder of the Carolingian dynasty in France. And that's why that dynasty is called the *Carolingian* and not the *Char-o-lingian* dynasty. It originally stemmed from the Germanic name *Karl*. And Charles Martel's grandson was 'Karl the Great.' Of course, we know him by the French version of his name – *Charlemagne*. And after Charlemagne, the French version of the name – *Charles* – became a common name for kings in Europe (though England didn't actually get a King Charles until the seventeenth century). And that is how the word *karl* meaning 'common man' became the name of kings in the form of *Charles*.

Now going back to the early Germans, the class of people below the Karls were the servant class – basically serfs or slaves. The original Germanic word for this class of people led to the later Old Norse term *thrall*. This term was later borrowed by the Anglo-Saxons and the term *thralls* came to be used in Old English as well. Even though English has lost that term in its original sens, it does survive in the word *enthrall* which means 'to captivate,' but originally it meant 'to hold in captive' in a more literal sense.

The thralls included slaves. A person could become a slave as a result of indebtedness. The children of slaves also tended to be slaves. But one of the most common sources of slaves were foreign enemies conquered in a battle or war. And in fact, the word *slave* comes from the word *Slav* meaning someone from the Slavic areas of Eastern Europe. During the later periods of

Germanic history, as the Germanic tribes were expanding into Eastern Europe, they defeated may Slavic tribes in battle. The defeated Slavs were taken into captivity by the Germans and the term *Slav* came to mean used as the word for a person held in servitude.

The term *Slav* passed into the common Latin of the Middle Ages and then eventually passed into English thanks to the Norman French. So even though the term originated with the Germans, English borrowed it indirectly via Latin.

By the way, speaking of Latin, it originally used the term *servus* for slave. And that is the root of the English words *serve*, *servant* and *servitude*. By the way, it is also the root of the word *sergeant*. By the Middle Ages, the term had evolved into the word *serf* in France, and then that word passed into England after the Norman Invasion. A serf and a slave were very similar, but a serf was tied to the land and a slave was tied to a person – the slave's owner.

Latin also had the term *conservus* which meant 'fellow slave.' It passed into French as *concierge* which meant doorkeeper and is still used in English.

Also, in Latin, a bought slave was a *mancipium* which came from the words *manus* meaning 'hand' and *capere* meaning 'to take.' It is the basis of the English words *emancipate* and *emancipation*.

A female slave was called an *ancilla* which is the basis of the English word *ancillary*. So, between the Germanic languages and Latin, we get lots of English words from this class of slaves and servants.

Now beyond the general political classes of people, it is very important to discuss one of the most important social institutions in Germanic society, and that's the Sib. The Sib was a group of freeborn people who were related by blood or marriage. So it was sort of like your extended family. The name *Sib* derives from the same root as *sibling* in Modern English. These were family-bound units and were a more basic level within the larger Germanic tribe. Anyone outside of the Sib was a potential enemy.

Now kinship networks were very large and very important in Germanic culture. It was a source of support and nurturing, but also a source of protection. They served much of the same purpose as the police or courts in Roman and modern societies. If a person was injured or killed by another person from another Sib, the members of the injured person's Sib were expected to avenge the action. But over time, this type of family feuding could result in a perpetual state of infighting and warfare.

In an effort to deal with potential source of conflict, the Germanic tribes encouraged cooperation within and among different Sibs. They did this through fosterage, which basically meant placing a child from his natural family into the home of another family thereby linking the families together. They also encouraged oath brotherhood between male members of different Sibs, and this basically involved the swearing of oaths between males of different sibs. And it often included ceremonies involving the mixing of blood thereby producing blood brotherhood. But

sometimes, none of these cooperative efforts worked, and a back-and-forth civil war would break out within and among the various Sibs.

So, in an effort to regulate this type of conflict, the Germanic tribes developed the concept of the *wergeld*. This word literally meant 'man payment' or 'man money.' You might remember that the Old English word for a male was *wer*, as in *werewolf* meaning 'man wolf.' Well, we see the same use of the word here as *wergeld*. And the wergeld was a payment required to be made from one Sib to another Sib if a member of one Sib killed or injured a member of the other Sib. If the payment was not made, the conflict would often escalate into an ongoing bloody feud between the Sibs for many subsequent generations.

So if a person was killed, his Sib would demand the wergeld. The amount of the wergeld depended on the victim's sex, age, and social status. It also varied according to the injury. Death required a larger payment than a lesser non-life-threatening injury. If the demanded amount was paid, the matter was resolved. But if it was not paid, the kinsmen or a member of the deceased or injured man's Sib could take retribution against anyone in the other Sib. This could then trigger a chain reaction between the Sibs. And since each Sib was often linked to and aligned with other Sibs through various social ties, the conflict could spread to other Sibs. So the wergeld was vary important to try to ensure the internal stability of the tribe. But you can also see why tribes were sometimes unstable over long periods of time. As we're going to see shortly, the tribes which emerged into history with the fall of the Western Roman Empire are quite different from many of the tribes described by Tacitus. So historians believe that these tribes would occasionally break apart, and the various factions would then combine and form new tribes. And this process ultimately resulted in some of the large Germanic tribes which would later conquer large portions of western Europe.

So we've looked at the social structure of the Germanic tribes, and we looked at how the Sibs tried to resolve conflicts between those various Sibs. Now let's look at the larger issue of Germanic law. And to do that, let's turn back to Tacitus. After discussing the Germanic kings, Tacitus discusses Germanic crime and punishment. He outlines the various punishments for certain crimes. For example, he notes that traitors and deserters are hanged from trees. Cowards and those committing incest or homosexuality are drowned in a swamp with a basket put over them. And he notes that the distinction in punishment reflects a belief that violent crimes should be displayed while they are being punished, but what they considered 'disgraceful acts' should be concealed. Tacitus then notes that certain lesser crimes are punished by requiring the payment of a fine – typically a certain number of horses or cattle. Some of this is paid to the king or the state, and some is paid to compensate the wronged person or their family. So this reference is probably picking up on the idea of the wergeld which I discussed earlier.

So let's take a closer look at Germanic law based on this and also later resources which provide further insight into Germanic legal customs.

Since the early Germans didn't maintain written records, most of the early Germanic law was based on the oral tradition which was held in the memory of certain persons who served as judges. Established legal precedent was memorized and passed on verbally. That meant that

justice tended to be personal and subjective. It wasn't until the fifth century – about three or four hundred years after Tacitus – that writing became more prevalent among the Germanic tribes. And it was also at that point that the various Germanic tribes began to adopt written legal codes (almost all of them written in Latin and based on Roman law). The lone exception were the laws of the Anglo-Saxons in England in the seventh century which were written in Old English.

But during this earlier period, during the time of Tacitus, it appears that the Germanic tribes were still using the common Germanic legal customs which had been used by the tribes for centuries.

Criminal cases were tried before the popular assembly of the Germans. This assembly had different names among the various Germanic tribes. The Saxons called it the *gemot* and the Franks called it *mallus*. But the Lombards and later Norsemen in Scandinavia called it the *Thing*.

For the most part, the focus of Germanic law was on compensation of the damaged party – not revenge or retribution. And we saw this in the discussion of the wergeld. But for some crimes, compensation couldn't really be paid to resolve the conflict.

So as Tacitus mentioned, traitors and deserters were punished by hanging. And cowards were drowned. The assembly or Thing could also prescribe other punishments.

For example, an offender could be deemed an outlaw. An outlaw was banished from all social systems and ties. His marriage was dissolved, he was not be given hospitality as a guest, and he could be killed by anyone without penalty. The term passed into Old English as *utlaga* meaning 'outside of the law.' The word has evolved over the centuries into its modern verison *outlaw*, basically meaning the same thing.

An offender could also be 'banished' from the tribe. This was very similar to be declared an outlaw, but technically an outlaw could be killed anywhere, whereas a banished person could only be killed if he remained in the territory from which he was banished, or if he returned to that territory later. But outside of the banished territory, he couldn't be killed.

Another method of settling issues of guilt or innocence was the *Ordeal* – or *ordel* in Old English. The term meant 'trial by physical test.' The Ordeal usually involved subjecting the accused person to a painful or life threatening test to determine his or her guilt or innocence. For example, the accused might be required to grasp a bar of red-hot iron or dip his hand into a pot of boiling water to retrieve a stone. If the hand healed properly, he was innocent. But if it did not, he was guilty. This type of practice continued into Anglo-Saxon England and even to the Salem witch trials in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During the Salem witch trials, a person accused of being a witch could be lowered into a lake or body of water which had been purified by blessing. If the person sank into the water and was consumed by the blessed water, she was innocent. But if she floated, thus being rejected by the blessed water, she was guilty. Obviously, being deemed innocent wasn't much consolation for a person who sank into the water and drowned. But again, this type of trial – if you want to call it that – was a later version of the

Germanic Ordeal, and so it was part of a very long and ancient tradition. And the Germanic Ordeal gave us the modern English word *ordeal* meaning 'a painful or difficult experience.'

So with that, I'm going to conclude this look at early Germanic society. Next time, we'll continue to explore Germanic culture with a look at Germanic religion and mythology. We'll also look more closely at the runic writing system developed by the early Germans.   And we'll continue to explore the evolution of the original Germanic language into the various tribal dialects which ultimately produced modern languages like English, German and other northern European languages.

So until next time, thanks again for listening to the History of English Podcast.